Deliberating community policing in Serbia

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Limerick Papers in Politics and Public Administration:


10. Aidan Hehir, *Guaranteeing the security of the state and the individual through codifying A right of humanitarian intervention*, 2005.
The decision to use a community policing strategy as a means to institute the principles of good governance to policing organisations in post-authoritarian or post-conflict environments has become almost automatic over the last decade of police reform. Besides the ONUSAL peacekeeping mission to El Salvador in 1994, community policing has featured in every police reform programme over the last decade. The challenge is to reconcile the high expectations of democracy held by a newly liberated populace with the capacity of a police force trained and equipped to function under very different political circumstances. Few studies of police and public expectations in such environments exist. Ronald Weitzer’s seminal study of police-community relations in Northern Ireland was one of the first studies to utilise in-depth interviews to measure community attitudes to policing in a divided society. Nevertheless his study suffered as the police was unwilling to participate in the research. This paper builds on the methodology of Weitzer and others by including police officers and by contrasting their concerns with the concerns of representative members of a transitional society. It does not suggest that Serbia and Northern Ireland at the time of Weitzer’s study share anything more than a common policing legitimacy problem. The paper aims to define this problem and to examine the type of solutions that have been proffered both by the police and by community leaders and other informed members of the public in Serbia.

It seems unfortunate that a study into community policing needs to establish a dichotomy that assumes a divergence of opinion between members of a policing organisation and members of the public. It is however, entirely appropriate to draw this methodological dividing line. Numerous studies (see Reiner 2000; Chan 1997), have found a distinctive occupational police culture. Many of the officers interviewed served together as combatants in the 1999 war in Kosovo, contributing to a shared history which further justifies assessing their perceptions separately from those that might be held by members of the public. A strong sense of solidarity is therefore assumed and although the research is cognisant of differing perspectives between management and rank and file officers, it takes into account a study undertaken by Seagrave (1996) which illustrated that both police leaders and officers ‘articulated similar interpretations of community policing’. In fact, in many ways the research presented below serves to strengthen this finding.

It is interesting to note that Seagraves’ study concurred with Weitzer’s by concluding that police did not perceive community policing as an osmotic philosophy requiring significant organisational change. Instead there was a tendency to understand it as an add-on policy, a supplement to ordinary policing duties aimed to build consensus for policing in a community. This study examines if this attitude is common to police in Serbia and if it is sufficient to satisfy the needs of the Republic.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this paper are based on parallel qualitative surveys undertaken between August and November 2002. Four municipalities, chosen as pilot sites by the Ministry of Interior for the Republic of Serbia for the introduction of community policing participated in the research. The survey on the police was conducted between 29th August and 4th September 2002 using focus groups consisting of six to eight police officers representing different ranks within the organisation. Avoiding the common problem with surveying police whereby younger, less senior officers are slow to respond in front of senior management, a number of one-to-one interviews
were also conducted. Unfortunately, no female officers participated as they had not yet been deployed to the pilot sites involved.

The second part of the survey was conducted with the assistance of a market research firm in November 2002. Eight focus groups were held with an ‘older’ group and a ‘younger’ group participating in each municipality. Participants were chosen by the author and included local opinion leaders, local government representatives, members of non-governmental organisations, media representatives, religious figures, social workers and professionals in the fields of health and law. The issues raised in these focus groups were largely informed by the findings of the research undertaken with the police.

| Municipality                      | Description                                           | Pop
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zvezdara, Belgrade</td>
<td>Urban with rural margins and large Roma settlement</td>
<td>132,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vrnjačka Banja, central Serbia</td>
<td>Tourist resort, rural mostly, presence of internally displaced persons</td>
<td>26,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novi Bečej, Vojvodina, north Serbia</td>
<td>Agricultural region, rural, 20% Hungarian, autonomous province of Serbia.</td>
<td>26,881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kragujevac, central Serbia</td>
<td>Urban, industrial city, high unemployment.</td>
<td>175,182</td>
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Table I: Pilot Sites – Serbian Community Policing Plan (2002 Census Republic of Serbia)

BACKGROUND

On 5th October 2000, when the Serbian Republic’s parliament building was stormed in Belgrade, 3650 armed police, with orders to take ‘extreme measures’ against protesters, were deployed to control a crowd of over half a million people. For years students and protesters had been mimicking dogs, barking at the police, to insinuate that the police was the dog of the Milošević regime. Criminalized by their political masters; demoralised by forced service in the Kosovo war and by their complicity with a regime that had brought war, poverty and international isolation to their country; most officers readily capitulated to the demands of the crowd. The image of them removing their helmets, borrowing jackets from protestors and melting into the massive crowd proved symbolic for a police organisation that was about to embark on a process of reform and democratisation. Reform was deemed necessary to re-establish the legitimacy of the police in the new democratic state that emerged in the wake of Milošević’s downfall. A survey taken at the time by a respected current affairs weekly found that only 44% of the population trusted the police.\footnote{Vreme, Belgrade, FR Yugoslavia, November 16th 2000 – Taken on a sample of 1639 adult citizens in Serbia between 24th – 30th October 2000.} The survey concluded that,

The public increasingly supports the necessity of establishment of democratic control over the military and the police, as well as their parallel professionalization and modernisation.
A subsequent report undertaken by Richard Monk (2001) on behalf of the Ministry of Interior, Republic of Serbia, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) pointed out that, ‘The police have become isolated from the community they serve ... they are mistrusted by the public’. Recognising the legitimacy crisis, the Ministry of the Interior together with members of a Serbian think tank, local ngo’s and members of the Danish Centre for Human Rights formulated a ‘Vision’(Republic of Serbia, 2001), which, among other priorities, spelled out the need to involve members of the community with the police. A Community Policing Board was established comprising police commanders from four municipalities that were chosen to be test sites for community policing projects; a chairman from the Ministry of the Interior; an academic with a research interest in crime prevention; and a representative of the OSCE, which was the main co-ordinating body for international support and assistance to the project.

The architects of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after World War Two re-organised policing to be a people’s militia. Constructed around the philosophies of self-management, the police were expected to enforce the ideologies of the Communist Party. Described as an ‘intricate and pervasive police system’ (Crampton 2002), police officers were expected to enforce social control and maintain a visible presence on the streets. In the 1990’s the police came under the influence of Slobodan Milošević who slowly increased its power and importance relative to the Yugoslav army. The internal structure and rank system and was re-organised to reflect the new militant role of a police that was used to repress dissenting elements to Milošević’s political objectives. The reputation of the police suffered as the authorities came to rely on the police more. Violent reactions to student demonstrations and to the ever-growing political opposition to the regime ensured that the majority of citizens associated the police with an undemocratic and repressive order.

Arguably, the transition from a communist to a regime-supporting force involved merely increasing the powers and extending the mandate of a police force that was trained and equipped to protect the Party’s ideologies. The move, however, from authoritarian to democratic policing involves a fundamental shift in the orientation of the police and, it might be said, has resulted in the organisation suffering from an identity crisis. New skills are required to uphold the rule of law that were never required before. New loyalties to a largely suspicious public demands a revolutionary degree of openness and transparency from an organisation unused to being accountable in any manner for any action. At the same time, the concept of providing a service while at the same time remaining an effective force seems at times contradictory in a highly criminalized and politically unsettled region. The Ministry of the Interior in Serbia realised early on that the ability to adapt in the new democratic environment depended on whether it had managed to;

- establish successful co-operation with citizens and other society structures, trained the police adequately, developed the necessary strategy, passed relevant legislation, adapted the police service to the working conditions, reformed police education, secured the necessary funds and support of the entire society (Republic of Serbia, 2002).
Accordingly, the Ministry looked at community policing as a basis upon which to re-negotiate a new social contract with the general public through an inclusive partnership approach to local security and governance.

The findings included here derive from research undertaken by the author on behalf of the OSCE and the Ministry of Interior, for whom the first priority before the introduction of community policing was to understand fully the extent of the gap between the expectations of the public and the capabilities and willingness of the police to implement community policing. The findings of the police and the public will be presented separately in order to facilitate comparison.

THE POLICE

Police at the four pilot regions examined in this survey exhibited a fairly uniform approach to the problems that faced their adoption of community policing. This seems natural as the police force in Serbia is highly centralised. The practice of returning police officers after training to the region in which they were brought up seems to have been the preferred technique used by the Ministry of Interior to bring a local dynamic to policing. In Zvezdara, an expansive suburb stretching from the edge of Belgrade to its rural outskirts, police claimed that 90% of the station’s officers were from the area. The station commander, for example, was born in the local maternity hospital and had lived his entire life in the area. Similarly in the smaller towns that participated in the survey, such as Vrnjačka Banja, the idea that officers native to the town had local knowledge was promoted as a fertile basis upon which community policing plans could be drawn. That said, the interviews at Novi Bečej, a small rural town in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, revealed that despite the fact that twenty per cent of the town was ethnically Hungarian, there were no Hungarian officers among the seventy-two men employed. Also, it should be noted that there were no members of the Roma-speaking community in any of the police stations surveyed. Male Serbs dominate policing. At the time of these interviews female officers were consigned to administrative duties and were not included in the survey.

At interview all police surveyed spoke enthusiastically about their day-to-day relationship with members of the public. Individual officers regularly claimed that they knew the first names of many people on their ‘security sector’. The initial impression given to the researcher was that a form of neighbourhood police officer tactic was being implemented. However, when asked to give examples about how this local familiarity had assisted their work, police officers were unable to provide anecdotal evidence. Officers complained that their ‘security sectors’ were too large to build a proper relationship and that there weren’t enough police officers to police the area effectively. Zvezdara, for instance had 172 officers (including management) to police an area 3.2 km² with a population of 132,352 people. This translates to 0.86 officers per one thousand people. A young officer at Vrnjačka Banja, not long emerged from the Police Academy, spoke about how it was quite embarrassing at first to return to the town in uniform. He talked about how friendly he had since become with the local shop owners whose district he policed. Another young officer, from Kragujevac, explained that he had caught a man guilty of sexual assault by getting information from the victim and her friends. He explained that he was lucky to get the description of the man and felt the evidence was given only because the victim knew him. He had grown up in an adjoining apartment block.
Obtaining information from the public was, according to officers at all ranks, a serious problem for police. In Kragujevac, the former industrial heart of Yugoslavia, officers spoke quite frankly about the issue, seeing it as a target for community policing to address. Asked during interview about the potential for a ‘neighbourhood watch’ project in the jurisdiction, officers pragmatically concluded that its success would depend on the community in which it is implemented. The primary problem would be that co-operative citizens would be considered ‘police spies’. It was especially difficult to get people to act as witnesses to crimes, it was explained. Police said that citizens wishing to report crimes were reluctant to give their names to the telephone operator and, according to one officer, it often happened that the witness contacted individual officers privately in their homes rather than go through official channels. Police emphasised that this was not due to a fear of criminals, but was instead symptomatic of a ‘mentality of non-co-operation’. ‘It’s difficult here’, said one officer, ‘family connections are very important’. ‘People have learned to look after themselves without the police’. Another officer remarked that ‘there was a fear of further processes, and that people did not want to become known locally as someone who calls the police’. A senior officer concurred and added, ‘The police were not always present in the past but now we are re-building ourselves’.

The problem of under-reporting seems to be more acute in urban regions than in rural locations. In Zvezdara there was also a perception among officers that the public is reluctant to contact the police in case they are seen as ‘police spies’. One officer with whom we spoke was particularly concerned about this and estimated that at his police station only one in every four hundred crimes come to the attention of the police. He also said that the number of arrests made have decreased dramatically since October 2000. It is difficult to compare the type of arrests as the police recording method changed shortly after October 2000. ‘People have no confidence in the police’, he said, ‘People don’t understand’. One officer said that giving his personal mobile phone number to local business people increased the number of incidents he was called to adjudicate.

Whereas in urban regions the problem with the public was generally perceived as that of a misrepresented police force trying to establish relations with a distrustful and apathetic populace, police in the rural regions spoke about the sudden growth of their towns. A senior officer in Novi Bečej talked about how the nature of policing had altered and that in recent years the town ‘became a bigger place and the community less familiar’. ‘It used to be we knew who did what, but now its different’. In addition, ‘felons have become more mobile and travel here from Belgrade’.

This perceived lack of confidence in the ability of the police on the public’s part was most evident when officers were asked their views on the challenge of confronting the high incidence of domestic violence in Serbia. According to police, domestic violence had only been criminalised recently and goes largely unreported. The problem according to most police was ‘sociological’. Domestic violence is seen by people to be a ‘family affair’ with victims tending not to involve the police unless there is a life-threatening incident. Police believed that this problem was embedded in the cultural make-up of people throughout the country.

Another problem, that of police-community relations with the sizeable Roma communities in every region under discussion, was also perceived as being a ‘sociological’ problem. It is noteworthy that the officer who spoke about only one in four hundred crimes being reported supervised a sub-station situated beside a Roma

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2 Legislation was passed in April 2002.
camp of over 10,000 people. Of the four project sites, the police at Zvezdara had made the most efforts to build relations with this socially marginalised minority group. The Captain at the station was able to point to a certificate of gratitude presented to him after a police football team had participated in a Roma football competition. Attempts had also been made to establish contacts with opinion leaders in the camp and one officer had spoken on the local Roma radio station. Unlike the police in any other region, the police in Zvezdara recognised that work needed to be undertaken to improve relations between police and Roma groups. It was underlined again and again that communication with this group was difficult – no officers were able to speak any of the Roma dialects or to define exactly what level of language skills was actually required. In Vrnjačka Banja police spoke at length about the difficulties in dealing with Roma communities. It was explained that although there were groups representing Roma concerns, ‘they remain an autonomous people who live outside society’.

While the Roma ‘problem’ was universal, particular issues arose in each region that served to highlight a lack of communication between the police and the public. The most indicative occurred in Novi Bečej; a rural town about which a senior Ministry of Interior official at its regional headquarters said that initiative was not being shown by the people and that they expected the police to solve everything alone. Speaking to the mayor of the town afterwards it was explained that the primary problem between police and the public revolved around the issue of farm produce being stolen from fields during the night. Asked if they had any solution to the problem, police at Novi Bečej explained that field thefts were out of their jurisdiction. They were awaiting a legislative solution that would render the theft of ‘movable farm produce’ a criminal offence. A legacy of socialist times, it seems that there are no trespass prohibitions in place as all land and the food produced thereupon is in the realm of public property. Police shrugged when it was put to the officers at interview that a number of farmers had requested them to tackle this issue by circumventing legislative hindrances. It emerged that farmers had formed a group with the aim of raising funds for private security but had received no assistance from the police. This was not a solution, according to the police, as the funds raised did not cover the costs of securing the fields. It was also pointed out that the physical area that needed monitoring placed a considerable strain on police. The consensus around the table was that ‘nothing could be done until the police are given more power to put criminals in prison’. The station commander expected the problem to be solved once the appropriate legislation was passed.

Besides Novi Bečej, where there was some tension between locally elected officials and police, the relations between local authorities and the police in the surveyed regions were relatively healthy. This is a significant observation as one year previously there would have been no contact between local officials and police officers. The mayor in Novi Bečej spoke of how historically he had been ignored and denied access to the police, but that the situation was changing. Other regions, however, witnessed the emergence of close relations being constructed between police management and municipal authorities. In Zvezdara, for example, the mayor and the police commander met regularly, both formally and informally, and had together agreed upon a community policing strategy with full support of the local authorities. Police had a page in the local magazine distributed free to every household. In Kragujevac the police and the local government shared the same building and relations were excellent. In Vrnjačka Banja, although officers openly disagreed with the attitude of the President of the Municipal Council on a number of
issues, including his discriminatory attitude to internally displaced persons (IDP’s) residing in the town, it was evident that police were working quite closely with the institution. A system of quantitative reporting had commenced nationally whereby daily crime statistics were sent to local government authorities. One region had attempted to go further by stimulating an informal accountability system in which local councillors were allowed to submit written queries regarding police policies. The questions, which covered issues beyond the remit of the local police force, and the written answers provided, showed this to be an ineffective but highly innovative scheme. Throughout all the pilot regions police concurred that the system of Mesna Zajednica would be a site upon which deeper relations could be built. There seemed to be an unawareness of non-governmental organisations (ngo) and the possible function they could play in a community policing strategy. At one site the police were unable to name one ngo in their region. The relationship between ngo’s and the police, at the time of this survey, remained antagonistic. According to one commentator this is due to the fact that ngo’s would have been prime motivators of public actions against the police in the Milošević era.

The pride of the Serbian community policing strategy was a project centrally initiated by the Ministry of Interior in Belgrade called the ‘School policeman’. Commenced in March 2002, this project involved deploying a dedicated school police officer to over 250 schools around Serbia. There were two aspects of the programme. The first involves a uniformed officer, entitled an ‘educator’, whose function it is to ‘build contacts with school children and increase the level of trust and confidence’ between them and the police through the provision of thematic lectures. Entitled ‘Policeman Friend of the Children’ talks were given by older more experienced officers to pupils, teachers and parents who would be invited to attend ‘lectures’ on subjects such as drugs, religious sects or traffic regulations. This same police officer would be involved in the ‘School Police Day’ activities where police officers would arrive on the first day of the academic year and speak to children. According to Ministry officials this officer served a dual purpose: to dispel the image of police officers as ‘bogeymen’ and to recruit candidates to join the police. The other aspect of the programme involved a plainclothes officer working in the school ‘observing

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3 One interesting question for example concerned the reasons why a local business man about whom it was known was corrupt was not arrested by the police. Another question involved a request for a night-shift duty police officer in village five miles from Novi Becej. Police answered that they did not have evidence to arrest the businessman and did not have resources for the night officer but that police would ensure that local nightclubs and cafés did not serve alcohol to anyone who might create a disturbance or play music too loudly. The night officer, it seems, was a question related to the issue of field theft.

4 Considered in the 1954 Constitution to be the ‘primary organs of state power’, mesna zajednica, which loosely translates as ‘people’s councils’, are community level institutions under the municipality’s authority designed to manage community events. They have buildings and full-time officials and exist in proportionate number to the size of a municipal area. For example, Zvezdara, with over 130,000 inhabitants has seventeen mesna zajednica of varying capacity. They are generally rundown places in urban areas while they remain central to rural life.

5 From an interview with Milos Gildenka in November 2002. Also, it must be noted that this relationship was swiftly changing as a number of ngo’s expressed a willingness to become involved with police community projects. Mainly, ngo’s members wished to help with police training in human rights, but it was unclear to what extent the Ministry of Interior were willing to accept this offer of assistance.

6 According to a Ministry source this programme is to counteract the way parents in Serbia often use the police as a threat to naughty children and diminish the manner by which police are negatively perceived by young children.
and monitoring’ the schoolyard, advising school management and facilitating a clinic for students and parents to discuss crime problems around the school. The job description tasks the school police officer with the prevention of crime and the protection of the school and its students and compiling regular reports. Meetings with school management prior to the beginning of the academic year are held to formulate strategies that would decrease the number of crimes perpetrated on school grounds. Asked to comment one school police officer listed tasks which would enable him ‘to note pattern behaviour and to suggest changes to traffic around the school’. A Ministry official spoke about how the school police officer is an ideal model for a community policing officer. The traits for the job included: sufficient working experience; clean professional career; men with a family; a good attitude towards children.

**THE PUBLIC**

The most noticeable perception of the police emanating from those interviewed was an agreement that the events of October 2000 represented an opportunity for the police to break with its past. It was clear that there existed an ‘old police’, associated negatively in the minds of respondents with the ‘old regime’, and a ‘new police’ associated positively with the new democratic order. And although it was observed that the introduction of female officers and the attitudes of younger police officers symbolised the ethos of this ‘new’ police, more importantly there seemed to be general agreement that the behaviour of the police since October 2000 had altered. The initial discussions at all focus groups were therefore dominated by observations and complaints about the old days – linked with war, economic decline and authoritarian political systems – but progressed quickly to address the public’s expectations of the new democratic police force.

The uncertainty associated with a changing environment was everywhere evident in all focus groups. Community, as a concept was defined in its narrowest terms; as the street upon which the respondent lived rather than the wider area policed from a central police station. In both rural and urban regions the transition being experienced related to the fragmentation of old communities and an adjoining sense of fear for one’s personal security. In Zvezdara, a suburb in the capital of Serbia, participants spoke the decline of community; ‘I believe the last few years divided us and estranged us from each other’. In Kragujevac and there was a division between newcomers who had arrived during the previous ten years and people who had been living in the city for a long time. One woman explained that ‘the town has lost its compactness … there is no sense of local community’. ‘Kragujevac has become a town of refugees, new settlers, displaced persons’. A common theme throughout these discussions was the remembrance of an idyllic past, an era associated most strongly by the familiar presence of a local police officer. One woman explained:

> I am from Kragujevac … and we used to have neighbourhood officers. As a child I remember Officer Gille, but he also knew every one of us. By the number of bread loaves sold in the store he knew if someone had guests.

A man from the group interviewed in Novi Bečej echoed these feelings when he said that ‘there used to be a so-called neighbourhood policeman. It was a very important thing for the criminal police as well because that officer knew every citizen’. The
disappearance of local police officers with deep roots in the community was marked by the appearance of a new centralised police force, manned by arrogant police officers with little communication skills and priorities at variance with the needs of the public. Current difficulties, it seems stem from this period.

The complete trust is lost because the police was not protecting the safety and security of its citizens but the system. Their role was simply altered, distorted.

The police became a more threatening presence in the early 1990’s – one respondent talked about how the small number of officers in his small town suddenly increased and that at the same time it became necessary to carry identification at all times. A municipality worker in Novi Bečej spoke of how they were became a political weapon and would ‘scare people’. Respondents described a police force corrupted by power, ‘distant from the people’, ‘frightening people’. According to one man, a father of a political activist beaten by the police, ‘they were omnipotent, they loved the power. How can they change overnight now?’ Another woman relates how a police officer forced her to wade across the river because a cavalcade with Milošević was due to cross the bridge later that day. A legacy for the post-October 5th police is the attitude of those who grew-up under a repressive force. A respondent in Vrnjačka Banja put it succinctly:

The youth are burdened by some stories, some prejudices, and they see the police as some institution for persecution, for retaliation. It is rare that someone young decides to ask the police for help

This lack of confidence or mistrust is manifested in the reluctance of people to become involved in any manner with the police. That people in Kragujevac have become used to being without an effective policing institution was exemplified in a story that spoke where, ‘A man saw someone sneaking around a neighbour’s house and he said it never occurred to him to call the police.’ Another cause of under-reporting might be found in an anecdote provided by a respondent in Kragujevac who was detained until dawn having brought a collapsed drunk to the hospital:

I noticed a man lying on the pavement. I took him to the hospital. By the time I settled down it was almost dawn. The police didn’t allow me to go home; they wanted to interrogate me. They wanted to know who I was, why did I help the man. That is how citizens feel about the police: frightened. Especially about giving information.

In Novi Bečej among a group town burghers it was underlined that ‘no one wants to do anything with the police, no one wants to co-operate’. Another man explained that he is often in a situation ‘to report cases of serious theft to the police’. ‘Then they take all the data about me as if I were the suspect. I know that they don’t take anonymous reports seriously.’ Others complained that there was a lack of feedback from the police, ‘a culture of secrecy’. This seems to propagate a perception that the police are not working. Respondents described individual officers as ‘passive and angry’. Crimes that are reported are seen to disappear forever inside the police station. In Vrnjačka Banja a solution was offered:
They should inform us at least once a year what is happening. When we run across something that is missing we will report it to the police. The police come and we expect them to start something … [but] it seems we have to call them again. They are in a hopeless state – maybe not all of them – to do the job correctly … they should be more effective, finish something and let the rest of us know that a job was finished. They should come and inform us, they us what they have found.

At every interview, journalists and social workers expressed their frustration with the reluctance of police to provide them with information. Police never refused requests for data but all respondents agreed that the information was never provided. A social worker in Belgrade spoke about her experiences in her dealings with the police where ‘sooner or later I would face a stone wall which I could not get across’. This lack of inter-agency co-operation was a principal topic at the Zvezdara focus group.

Whereas social workers and those in similar professions tended to understand the lack of transparency and openness as a symptom of an inexpertly managed information system, members of the general public tended to understand it in more conspiratorial terms. The police for many people is an insecure organisation attempting to hide its incompetence. The reason feedback from investigations is withheld is due to the fact that the police have no criminal investigation abilities. This belief was evident from interviews in both rural and urban sites. A respondent in Zvezdara talked about her experience reporting a robbery to the police. She concluded that it was useless. Eventually, she explains, she had to use personal connections in the police to discover that neither the thief had been caught nor the stolen goods recovered. Another respondent at the same interview spoke of how a month after his house had been burgled and his car robbed he – also using personal contacts within the police – was told the perpetrator that had been identified by the police was being protected by powerful people and could not be arrested. This sense that the police are ineffective comes out most strongly among inhabitants of urban areas. Whereas those in rural regions spoke about the ever approaching threat of serious crime, people living in Belgrade and Kragujevac were constantly confronted by lawlessness. Respondents were concerned with their personal security, particularly at night, and for the safety of their children. The absence of police officers on the street led respondents to believe the police were neglecting their duties.

In the busiest streets in Kragujevac and in the centre of the city, where the café Zelengora is, you will never see a policeman. There are many people during the day and night, young people. They [the police] know that they are a risky group and problems can always occur but they are not there. I know three cafés where police are always in. In fact they are very near our police station.

Police were seen to be overly indulgent in activities that generate income from fines, such as traffic policing. They are seen to be avoiding serious criminals, ‘protecting buildings’, according to one lady from Belgrade, ‘not the people inside the buildings’. One man claimed a young police officer told him that, ‘During my working hours, I look to it that I see as little as I can, that I get through my day’. Inconsistency in the use of police discretionary powers has led the public to see the police as discriminatory. In Kragujevac: ‘I never saw a tow truck take away a good
expensive car. It is usually Zastava vehicles, Yugos, Ficas’. In Vrnjačka Banja: ‘Somehow [the towing vehicle] always tows Yugos and old Fiats and skips a jeep or an Audi although it is parked where it is not allowed to’. Another woman related how police always asked, ‘What is your profession?’ The manner by which police deal with victims of crime also, for some respondents, highlighted an inappropriate approach. Their inability to properly handle victims of domestic violence and rape was a particular concern for social workers and ngo representatives. A respondent from an ngo related how she witnessed a female police officer placed a little girl who had been raped by seventeen boys in front of over 150 pupils from her school to identify the ones who raped her. Numerous examples were given of incidents where the victim was treated as complicit in the crime. An example from Kragujevac, which seems to have a higher than average level of domestic violence and abuse, was given of a sixteen year old girl who was being beaten and abused by her father. The police came a few times but said to her, ‘Listen you don’t make any problems so that we have to come here for no reason’. And later she was asked, ‘Why don’t you get married, you’re a pretty girl, why don’t you get married?’

The most serious charges of discrimination, however, came from members of the Roma community. A representative Egyptian Roma living in the Zvezdara district of Belgrade was unequivocal about institutional racism in the police when he said:

The greatest threat for us in Zvezdara comes from the police itself. They beat all of us. I was physically threatened not to bring Roma people to the neighbourhood. A kid stole a car wheel and police in civilian clothes beat him to death; everybody knew that. My uncle wanted to build a house for his son next to his stall. He started building and the police came, tied him to tree and beat him really bad because he was building at an improper place. Just across the street a Serb was building one house next to another at the same time …

The respondent told the focus group that he maintained records of incidents of physical and mental abuse committed by the police on the Roma population but that he has been advised not to make it public. His own mother was is included in this record – a eighty year old woman who had her jaw broken by an impatient police officer because she was slow to produce her identity card. In his opinion discrimination against the Roma population was an ‘official policy’ of the police. At every pilot site, during these meetings and at other less formal discussions the researcher was left with the impression that the Roma in Serbia are systematically under-policing and discriminated against. One respondent, an ex-police officer, explained the police only enter a Roma settlement if they are pursuing a suspect:

If a fight takes place in a Roma settlement and the police force does not want to enter it … police officers just say it’s none of their business. People shoot at cafés, innocent people on the streets get hurt, but there are no police officers in a Roma settlement. There are no firemen to put out a possible fire. There are no ambulance vehicles in a Roma settlement so if a woman is in labour she will deliver in the settlement without medical assistance. There are 150 settlements inhabited by more than 70,000

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7 This incident occurred before the relevant legislation was passed in April 2002.
people who have no protection provided: neither by the police nor the state.  

In Novi Bečej the issue of field thefts, which had obviously become politicised, epitomised the public’s dissatisfaction with their local police. A retired judge from the town spoke about the high incidence of thefts from farmers fields; ‘There are still many thefts in the fields and that’s a criminal action. The police say it’s none of their business, and I say it should be their business’. A politician spoke about the manifold efforts that had been made by local inhabitants to solve the problem. He argued that

We shouldn’t be discussing the law, but how to improve police work in the scope of already existing laws and within the police jurisdiction and also to meet citizen’s interests.

A local ‘Security and Safety’ committee was set up in Novi Bečej to address all aspects of local security but, according the President of the City Council the police told the committee that they would attend local government meetings ‘when they have time’. The idea was to create a board comprised of members from various government structures, citizens and police officers to work together on local concerns. At the moment the police are ‘under no obligation to come, and [claim] that it is none of their business. Police management, it seems, is awaiting the new Law on Local Self-Government (2002) to be passed, which would empower local authorities to work with police structures. What is interesting about the Novi Bečej case study is that local government was in the hands of representatives of the minority Hungarian population who firmly believed that ‘there is no co-operation between the local self rule and the police’. Their conclusion was that the President of the Municipality should take responsibility for public security. The initiative whereby police sent local crime statistics to municipal offices was welcomed but more accountability was requested as the police at present ‘are more untouchable than any other public service’. ‘Some kind of civilian control’ was called for. The point was made that there is no co-operation between the two important power structures - democratically elected local government see themselves on one side, while on the other there is the police, whose power is seen to derive from Ministry officials in Belgrade rather than from the public. This concept was also raised in other localities. The community in Zvezdara was fortunate, it was said, that their police commander was a hard-working, devoted police officer but that this was an exceptional case. ‘It is important that we be consulted on who will be the chief of Zvezdara [police]’. Another concurred, adding

I don’t know anyone from my generation, or even a previous one that was present at any such meeting with representatives of the police force.

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8 ‘The exact number of Roma in Serbia is unknown, as the majority have no registered place of residence. In the 2002 census, 109,000 persons declared themselves as Roma. In reality, the figure is bound to be higher. Dejan Markovic, representative of Serbia for the Roma National Congress, the international Roma organisation, says 600,000 to 800,000 Roma inhabit the territory of Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Professor Bozidar Jaksic, sociologist at the Belgrade Institute for Social Sciences, gives a lower figure. “There are about 350,000 to 400,000 Roma in Serbia,” this acknowledged expert on the issue maintains.’ IWPR’S BALKAN CRISIS REPORT, No. 506, July 08, 2004
A publisher in this mid-forties also mentioned civilian control as a pre-requisite to police becoming a more effective and trusted institution:

They are mentioning civilian control over the army. I believe that should happen with the police force as well. That way ordinary citizens can have insight into what they are doing, and how they are doing it.

And again, by the manager of a factory in Novi Bečej:

If their plan was available to us, we would be more informed. What they need is a planned approach.

In Kragujevac similar sentiments were expressed. A respondent spoke of the ‘problem’ when the city assembly and the local authorities have no power over the police’. It is interesting to note that during a similar survey undertaken in the ethnic-Albanian dominated region of south Serbia, civilian control and a say in the choice of police chief was one of the few issues upon which members of the Roma, Serb and Albanian populations agreed fully.

The core perception therefore of the police is that it needs to build relationships with the public. As a physician in Vrnjačka Banja concluded, ‘One thing for certain is that in the police reforms something has to be done about bringing them closer to the citizens’. People in general understand that the police is undergoing transition and at every discussion the achievements of the police to distance itself from its authoritarian past was fully acknowledged. The introduction of female officers, the less militant uniform, the noticeable softening in attitude and behaviour were often cited as examples that indicate the start of a cultural transformation of policing in Serbia. The school policeman programme was a reference point for respondents, most of whom had children. This programme contained for many the future direction of community policing in the Republic. For some the school policeman and the effect his presence had on the consumption of drugs in schools was an model of effective crime prevention. When asked what traits a police officer should possess the school policeman was considered to be very similar to the neighbourhood policeman respondents had experienced in the 1970’s when they were growing up. A teacher describes his effect:

We were all sceptical about having a policeman in the school. We all agreed that the children would be afraid. So we weren’t very thrilled about the idea but I can say that it was really a nice and peaceful period. He had a lot of work until all the fights and thefts ended. It was nice. He fitted in and the pupils accepted him. It was possible to talk to him. We were satisfied.

CONCLUSION

There is evidence of a divergence between police and public opinion as to the future direction of community policing in Serbia. Much is expected of the Serbian police and it is quite clear that reform is being demanded on two fronts. Firstly, there is the political issue of reform which is connected to a historically justified nervousness about the ease to which Serbian policing can be manipulated from a central source.
This push for reform is emanating mainly from local government sources who understand too well that policing is intimately associated with central rather than local government. This is observable not only in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, where local government is demanding more control over the Belgrade-controlled police force, but also in the other project sites under examination. The police is an institution that requires control mechanisms in order to foreclose the possibility that it could be used again as a political weapon by an authoritarian government. Subsequently, community policing is defined in terms of the police relinquishing power granted to it during the nineties by coming under the control of democratically elected local officials.

Secondly, there are calls for reform coming from ordinary men and women who have genuine concerns regarding the effectiveness of the police. There is doubtlessly a feeling that the police is moving in the right direction. Two years after 5th October 2000 the residents of the regions surveyed were able to point to a number of visible differences in the police that signalled, at the very least, that the police were reform-oriented. All respondents appreciated the 'new face of policing', and spoke about the new attitude of police officers who are more polite, less anonymous and more accessible in general. Especially appreciated is the introduction of patrolling female officers, 750 of whom were being deployed during the research period. A degree of cynicism was also expressed however by respondents impatient at the progress of reform and suspicious about the ultimate destination of change. One woman put it thus:

... at least they don’t do what they aren’t supposed to do, the only problem is that they still don’t do enough of what they are supposed to do

This perception was made manifest in the way respondents described the police as an institution that remains difficult to communicate with. There is therefore a strong need to see a cultural transformation of the institution, as evidenced by the pre-occupation of many respondents with the attitude and behaviour of the police; the discriminatory practices; and the overtly male and ethnically Serb constitution of an organisation policing a republic with over twenty minority groups. But respondents also spoke of the need for a police force with improved criminal investigation abilities and resources to tackle the growing sense of personal insecurity mentioned at every interview.

What the police ‘is supposed to do’ is therefore the crux of the issue facing the police. There is some evidence to suggest that organisation is less certain of its role in a democracy than it was under previous forms of government. Influential reformers within the Ministry spoke about the need to return policing to the period when Yugoslavia was under Tito’s rule. Crime prevention tactics such as the ‘School Policeman’ programme epitomised this approach to community policing. This highly successful programme was a direct descendant of crime prevention tactics practiced in the 1970’s (see Simonović 2003). Many rank and file officers, frustrated by what they perceived to be the public’s lack of understanding, felt that thematic lectures delivered to selected audiences would be a method by which to increase police-public co-operation. Such ‘civic education and social protection programmes’ had also been used in the 1970’s. Furthermore, it was felt that television advertisements showing police officers in a good light would reinforce this new approach to a public. This leads to an unfortunate observation that for many officers it was the public and not the police that needed to be educated. Moreover, it exemplifies an organisation in an
unfamiliar environment attempting to reconcile old skills to new expectations. The fear is that it might be interpreted by the public in terms of the brand changing but the product remaining the same.

There was also a noticeable divergence among senior officers, some of who were more reform-oriented than others. With the glaring exception of police in Zvezdara, who had authentic plans to build sustainable and moderately accountable systems with local government and non-governmental organisations, the most discussed problem with community policing was expressed in terms of manpower and a lack of resources. Police leaders felt (and with some justification) that without sufficient vehicles, equipment or manpower community policing could never be practised as it was in West European countries. Additionally, most police felt the problem with the public could be remedied by up-to-date legislation, which serves to blame the slowness of reform on the government rather than on the police itself. The police are ready to reform further, it was communicated, but are constricted to act within the boundaries of their current means.

Unfortunately, many of the demands made by the respondents in this survey are located outside these boundaries and necessitate major internal change in the Ministry of the Interior. At the heart of both political and societal dissatisfaction with policing is the issue of communication. All parties agreed that sort of two-way channel was required. The police also sought more opportunities to communicate with the public, albeit on their own terms. Police realised the need however to utilise local MZ institutions to be become more available to local municipalities. Some officers referred to the difficulties of this becoming sustainable without appropriate legislation in the long awaited Local Government Bill and were hesitant to speak about the degree of control over their activities that might be devolved to local authorities. This was a sensitive political issue as there are local governments that are under the control of non-Serb representatives. That the Ministry of Interior could itself re-structure to devolve more authority to local police commanders seems to have been the theme of a contest within the Ministry between reformists and conservative forces. Other than local authorities, police wanted to have greater access to social workers, clergy and ngo leaders in each region and thus the creation of ‘Safety Boards’ was supported. These were tasked to confront local security issues. The composition of these boards would be entirely voluntary and the agenda would be directed by the police. One needs therefore to question whether participation on these boards would convey a less authoritarian image and produce the form of two-way communication upon which an improvement in public confidence seems to depend.

Evidence from countries practising such forms of public consultation is not encouraging (Hayes 2001). In Britain, studies have shown that if local policing policies cannot be influenced, the consultative process tends to be ‘ritualistic, neither encouraging involvement nor enhancing accountability’ (Neyroud 2001:13).

This paper proposes that Serbian community policing should be defined in terms that prioritise public participation as a principle of good governance to be adapted by the Serbian Ministry of the Interior. The public is patently awaiting egalitarian local communication structures with authentic and statutory (if not financial) powers over local police forces. A participatory approach is required that goes beyond public consultation, which too often, as Jürgen Habermas (1971:62-86) observed, results in the acclamation of decisions already made. A form of progressive political accountability focussed on local police policies that would supplement retrospective legislative accountability structures would seem to be a fundamental pre-requisite to a more effective policing environment in Serbia. This would, of
course, require a fundamental shift of attitude by the police. It would require police to adopt a more democratic perspective to local policing issues. However it would also require a fundamental shift in the attitudes of the public, many of whom harbour grievances that may only be assuaged by a meaningful institutional reform of the police.

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